

AN AMERICAN GEOGRAPHY OF THE CHINESE THREAT

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An American Geography of the Chinese Threat

*Jean-Loup Samaan*¹

Abstract

The year 2010 was marked by a reemergence of the Chinese issue in US military discussions. This trend is less a shift in US defense policies than a reaffirmation of its core principles. Indeed, beyond the theoretical and historical determinations of the US position, it is possible to map precisely the US strategic community's current perception of China's rise at the regional level in the Pacific Ocean and at the local level in the Taiwan Strait. As a result, US experts have formulated a large number of scenarios for military decision makers. Even though these narratives of a Sino-American conflict are leading to significant shifts in the US military posture (particularly for the US Air Force and US Navy), they suffer from several analytical pitfalls and, moreover, reveal signs of a missile gap syndrome in the US defense planning community.

The year 2010 witnessed the return of an issue more than a decade old: the possibility of a confrontation between the United States and China. While the question of the growing economic interdependence between the two countries is well known to the larger public, military disputes had been relegated to the background for several years by the main media. Indeed, American interventions in Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003), then the financial crisis of 2008 had temporarily distracted observers of the international scene from power struggles in the Pacific arena.

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The year 2010 began with the Obama Administration's notification to Congress on January 29 of arms sales to Taiwan of nearly 6.4 billion dollars. In accordance with the *Taiwan Relations Act*—framework for American-Taiwanese arms cooperation—the Democratic president approved the export of an arsenal that included Patriot PAC-3 missiles, Black Hawk helicopters, Harpoon anti-ship missiles, anti-mine ships, and electronic warfare equipment. With the exception of Obama's refusal to include a feasibility study on submarine capabilities and renovation of Taiwanese F-16 combat aircraft, the package negotiated with Taipei included the same equipment that the Bush administration had previously approved.²

China reacted strongly to this agreement, suspending military exchanges between Beijing and Washington. In June, the Shangri-La Dialogue, a security summit for Asia and the Pacific, was marked by clear tensions between the delegations from the two countries. On the sidelines of the event, China even rejected the request by Robert Gates, Secretary of Defense, to visit Beijing.

In the following months, Hillary Clinton's speech in Hanoi in July on the territorial disputes in the South China Sea and the strong Chinese reaction in August to the joint American-South Korean naval exercise in the Yellow Sea led many observers to conclude that the two countries were now entering into a new phase of open rivalry.

However, it appears that this sequence of events should be seen less as a turning point in the "Chinese question" for Washington than as the reaffirmation of American concerns about the capabilities and intentions of China in Asia and consequent implications for the interests of the United States in the area.

To understand this phenomenon, we must look more closely at the elements making up the "Chinese threat" in the strategic imagination of the United States and, on that basis, analyze the accompanying geography. Based on an analysis of publicly available intelligence, official documents, and a field study in Washington,³ we discuss here how and why American military cartography is still focused on the Taiwan Strait. As a result, scenarios of confrontation that are drawn up today still determine not only the prepositioning of American armed forces in the Pacific region, but also discussions within the Pentagon and with local allies (Japan, South Korea, Australia) on the use of force in the event of a future conflict.

2. It should be pointed out that the process of validating such arms exports takes around two years in the American political system.

3. This article has benefited from a field study conducted in Washington, DC, in December 2010, which included thirty interviews with representatives from the Department of Defense, Congress, and several think tanks.

The Foundations of the “Chinese Threat” in American Military Thinking

In 2005, the American magazine *The Atlantic* published an article explicitly titled: “How We Would Fight China.” The author, journalist Robert Kaplan, went to the extreme of presenting the most alarmist scenarios on China’s rise in power and did not hesitate to depict the country as the new Soviet Union, the Pacific Ocean as Germany of the Cold War, and the Pacific Command of the American armed forces as the NATO of earlier years. While this widely discussed article was filled with simplistic clichés, it nonetheless is an accurate illustration of thinking within the Department of Defense (Bush and O’Hanlon 2007, 27). In light of this, and to better understand the success of such discourse on the imminence of a Sino-American conflict, we must examine two determinant elements of the US perception: the metatheory of the international system that underlies Pentagon analyses and the weight of Sino-American history in Washington’s contemporary reactions.

The “Realist” Theory of China’s Military Development

Concerning the “Chinese threat,” American strategic discourse invokes, implicitly or explicitly, an extremely simple premise: any change in the distribution of power within the international system engenders conflict. Consequently, China’s rise in power would inexorably lead to a weakening of the United States and, thus, to a confrontation between the two.

This premise is the central paradigm of the pessimistic realist school (John Mearsheimer, Robert Gilpin),⁴ long dominant in the United States. It is based on the idea that international politics is a zero-sum game: the decline of X is mathematically cause or consequence of the rise of Y. To support his thesis of the inevitability of a US-China conflict, Mearsheimer argues that “. . . the mightiest states attempt to establish hegemony in their own region while making sure that no rival great power dominates another region. The ultimate goal of every great power is to maximize its share of world power and eventually dominate the system.” He continues: “Specifically, China will strive to maximize the power gap between itself and its neighbors, especially Japan and Russia, and to ensure that no state in Asia can threaten it” (Mearsheimer 2005, 47).

The idea that China represents a threat for the United States because of the very structure of the international system has proved to be even more prominent since

4. For an illustration of the theses of the pessimistic realist school, see John Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: Norton, 2001) and Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

the end of the Cold War. Indeed, the political and military decision makers in Washington have focused on the same point during the last two decades: to ensure its national security, the United States must remain the top military power in the world and forestall the ambitions of a possible peer competitor.⁵

We can better understand how American analysts characterize the military modernization of China by looking at how they use analogies to Wilhelm II's Germany or Hirohito's Japan.⁶ In a thesis submitted to the Naval Postgraduate School, Matthew Tritle identifies the similarities between current Chinese discourse on the need for a modern military fleet, capable of securing access to energy resources in Africa and the Middle East, and the German and Japanese arguments in their time.⁷ While a few limits to the comparison are sometimes expressed,⁸ this analogy provides the first key to understanding the mental representations of American experts on Chinese geostrategy.

The Weight of History in the Pentagon's Portrayal of Sino-American Relations

An empirical factor should be added to this theoretical one. More specifically, one cannot understand the current American perception without reexamining the history of Sino-American relations since Mao's accession to power in 1949. This history includes several episodes of rising tensions, such as the direct and high intensity military confrontations during the wars in Korea⁹ and Vietnam, the "accidental" bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade in 1999 during the Kosovo war, or even the accident involving the American EP-3 spy plane, which flew into Chinese airspace in 2001.

5. On this foreign policy consensus, see Barry Posen, "The Case for Restraint," *American Interest* November–December (2007): 7–17.

6. See, among others, Walter Mead, "In the Footsteps of the Kaiser: China Boosts US Power in Asia," *The National Interest* September (2010); Robert J. Art, "The United States and the Rise of China: Implications for the Long Haul," in *China's Ascent: Power, Security, and the Future of International Politics*, ed. Robert S. Ross and Zhu Feng (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008), 260–290; and Douglas C. Peifer, "China, the German Analogy, and the New Airsea Operational Concept," *Orbis* 55, no. 1 (Winter 2011): 114–131.

7. Matthew C. Tritle, "The Growth of the Chinese People's Liberation Army Navy: Impacts and Implications of Regional Naval Expansion" (master's thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, 2007).

8. Most commonly, it is acknowledged that China's economic model should be distinguished from the autarky of imperial Japan and, unlike pre-1914 Germany, it does not depend on colonies for its exports.

9. On this episode, see the concise and gripping operational analysis in Eliot Cohen and John Gooch, *Military Misfortunes: The Anatomy of Failure in War* (New York: Free Press, 1990).

The case of Taiwan, where Chiang Kai-shek and the nationalists found refuge following the victory of the Communist Party, illustrates even better the weight of history in informing the Pentagon's perception. On December 2, 1954, the mutual defense treaty between Washington and Taipei was signed. For Dwight Eisenhower, it was then a question of implementing the containment strategy towards the communist world: this treaty not only maintained that the Republic of China was the only legitimate representative of China, but also included a military assistance clause in case of attack against one of the parties. In the following years, the US Navy deployed its ships on two occasions (1954, 1958) in the Strait to prevent the collapse of the nationalist government.

In 1979, Washington revised its preceding commitments by drafting a new document, the Taiwan Relations Act, which has framed the bilateral relations between the United States and Taiwan since that time. Washington is now committed to supply arms to Taiwan so it can defend itself in case of attack. Even so, and contrary to a widespread idea, the agreement does not include the mutual defense clause that earlier obliged the United States to protect the island directly. It stipulates that the President and the Congress must agree on the appropriate action in case of a threat against Taiwan, but does not guarantee, in any case, a military response.

Sixteen years later, the dilemma emerged in concrete terms. In June 1995, the granting of an American visa to the Taiwanese president, Lee Teng-hui, for a private visit to his alma mater, Cornell University, aroused the ire of Beijing: up to this point, the Clinton Administration had been committed to refusing the visa. There followed a public condemnation of Teng-hui's visit, accompanied by the recall of the Chinese ambassador to Washington, the suspension of dialogue with Taiwan, and the holding of military exercises in July 1995 in an attempt to intimidate Taipei. The pressure came to a head eight months later when, in March 1996, on the eve of presidential elections in Taiwan, Beijing held military maneuvers close to the island, including a test of M9 missiles, which are capable of carrying a nuclear payload. The missiles exploded near Taiwan's two main ports, Kaohsiung and Keelung. Bill Clinton reacted immediately by ordering the deployment of two naval-air groups into the Strait to demonstrate the solidarity of the United States with Taiwan.¹⁰ The episode reveals both Chinese determination with respect to reunification with Taiwan and also, more worryingly, the speed with which an escalation towards open conflict between the two countries can be set in motion.

Since then, several incidents have acted as regular reminders that the 1996 crisis resolved nothing. In 1999, Lee Teng-hui proposed a "state to state" dialog with

10. See Nancy Tucker's analysis, "China-Taiwan: US Debates and Policy Choices," *Survival* 40, no. 4 (1998): 150-167.

Beijing. The latter immediately saw that as a declaration of independence and the response assumed the form of air patrols in the Strait. Over the course of the 2000s, the leaders of the People's Republic stated on several occasions that Taiwanese independence would be a *casus belli*. In light of this historical background, the controversy over the American arms sale to Taipei in January 2010 confirms that the Taiwan Strait remains the center of gravity of the Sino-American confrontation. Beijing has reaffirmed that Taiwan's reunification with the People's Republic is inevitable and probably continues to organize its military planning under the assumption of a confrontation in the area. On its side, the United States still projects onto this region a portrayal of the Chinese threat and intends to contain China by preserving Taiwan's autonomy.

Although not likely today, the assumption of a confrontation does have considerable geopolitical implications for Chinese expansion, the continuation of the American military presence in the region, and the security guarantees that the US gives to countries such as South Korea and Japan. All of that contributes, then, to form the American map of the Chinese threat.

Drawing the Map of the Chinese Threat

Understanding the contemporary thinking of American military decision makers on China first requires a concrete visualization of the Asia-Pacific Theater and, more specifically, a visualization of the nerve center: the Taiwan Strait. While this geographic representation of the forces involved is necessary, it is not sufficient. As can be seen from the analyses made today in Washington, the Chinese threat also comes from the supposed strategy of circumventing American power that Beijing has cleverly prepared.

From the Pacific Zone to the Taiwan Strait, Theater of the Concentration of Forces

A contemporary map of the American forces deployed under the control of the Pacific Command¹¹ allows us to visualize the explicit containment of China implemented by the Pentagon. As the following map shows, the network of American

11. The *Pacific Command* is one of the Department of Defense's six regional commands. The others are the *European Command*, the *Central Command*, the *Southern Command*, the *Northern Command*, and the *African Command*.

military bases and installations in the region (Diego Garcia, Singapore, Philippines,¹² Guam, South Korea, Japan, and the Headquarters of the Pacific Command, or PACOM, in Hawaii) allows the US to contain all possible Chinese maritime expansion. This coercive capacity of American prepositioning stands out even more when it is correlated with the so-called theory of the two island chains that are supposed to open China's way to acquiring global naval power.¹³ From this point of view, China cannot go beyond the first chain without facing the bases and installations in Singapore, Philippines, Japan, and South Korea. Guam and Hawaii, for their part, provide fundamental strategic depth.

When questioned, American decision makers hasten to refute the idea of containing rising Chinese naval power. They minimize the importance of the system by explaining that it is above all a legacy of the Second World War, thus a strategy directed at Japan. Then, they emphasize that this system has not prevented China from developing its naval capacities and that, consequently, "if there was containment, it was ineffective, to say the least."¹⁴

Nevertheless, through an almost geographical determinism, this relation of regional forces contributes, in large part, to making Taiwan the center of gravity of the Sino-American rivalry. In other words, China's absorption of Taiwan would open the way to the second chain of islands, and reinforce the assertion of Chinese maritime power. This is why a more detailed focus on the Taiwan Strait area allows us to observe the military implications of this center of gravity.

Map 2 displays all of the Chinese, Taiwanese, and American forces that would be mobilized in case of a conflict. In the case of the United States, Kadena base on Okinawa, which includes Air Force and Marine Corps contingents, would be the base most likely to intervene in the initial phase. Located around 750 kilometers from Taiwan, the planes of the American armed forces stationed at Kadena would have about one hour flying time to the island.¹⁵

12. Despite the closure of the American air base in the Philippines in 1991 (following a decision of the local government), a hundred American soldiers are still deployed in the south of the country.

13. Admiral Liu Huaqing, architect of China's naval modernization in the 1980s and 1990s, is the originator of this theory of the two island chains. See James Holmes and Toshi Yoshihara, *Chinese Naval Strategy in the 21st Century: The Turn to Mahan* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 27ff.

14. Interviews at the Department of Defense, Washington, DC, December 2010.

15. Interviews, Washington, DC, December 2010.

MAP 1: AMERICAN PRESENCE IN ASIA-PACIFIC



MAP 2: MILITARY BALANCE IN THE TAIWAN STRAIT

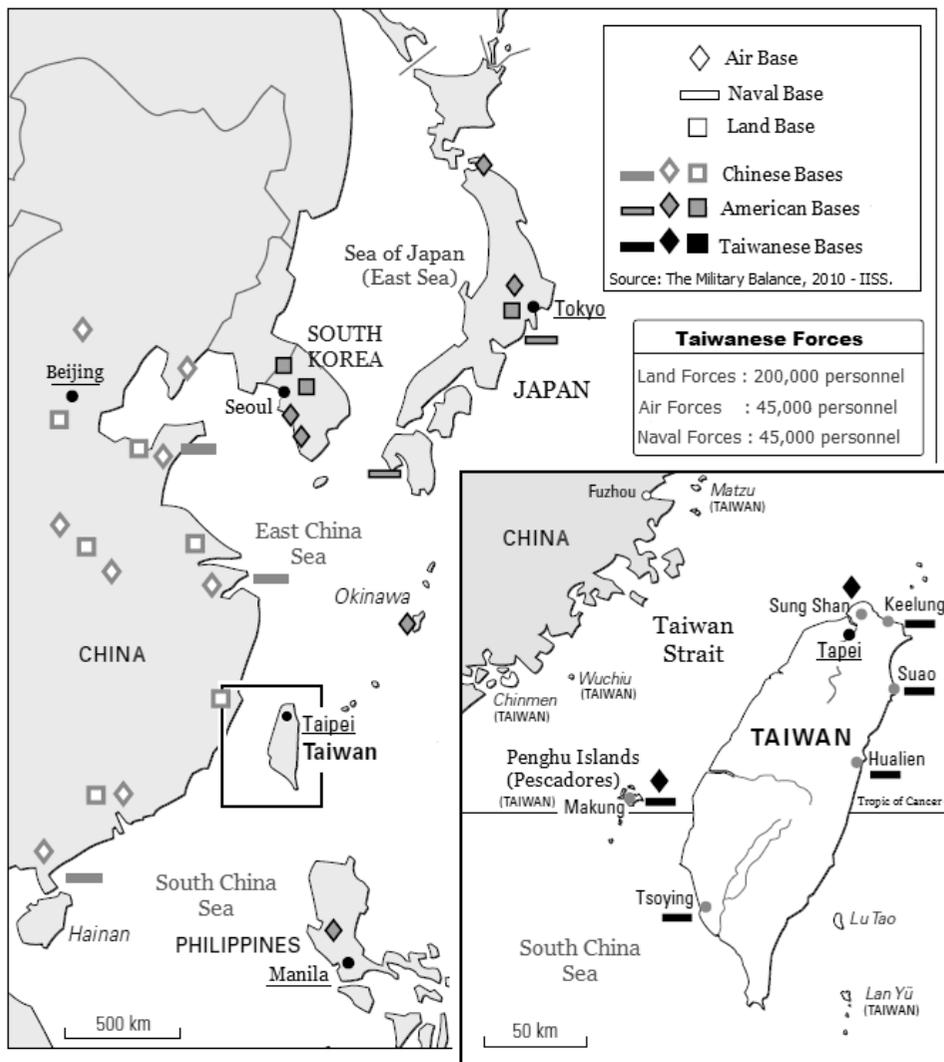


TABLE 1: COMPARISON OF MILITARY RESOURCES BETWEEN CHINA AND TAIWAN

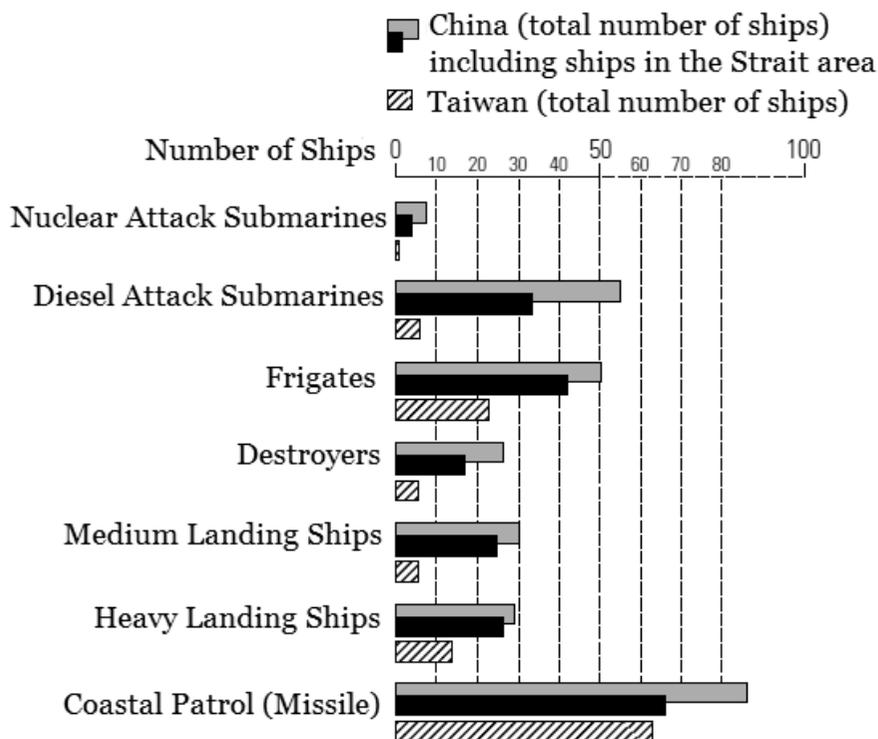
Military Resources (Source: US Department of Defense, 2010)	China		Taiwan
	Total	Taiwan Strait Area	Total
Personnel (active)	1.25 million	400,000	130,000
Infantry Divisions	19	6	0
Infantry Brigades	25	11	8
Armor Divisions	9	4	0
Armor Brigades	8	3	4
Artillery Divisions	2	2	0
Artillery Brigades	17	6	5
Amphibious Divisions	2	2	0
Amphibious Brigades	3	3	3
Tanks	7,000	3,100	1,100
Artillery Pieces	8,000	3,400	1,600
Naval Forces	Total	East and South China Sea Fleets	Total
Destroyers	25	15	4
Frigates	49	40	22
Tank Landing Ships	27	25	12
Medium Landing Ships	28	23	4
Diesel Attack Submarines	54	32	4
Nuclear Attack Submarines	6	2	0
Coastal Patrol (Missile)	85	65	61
Air Forces	Total	Within Range of Taiwan	Total
Fighters	1680	330	388
Bombers/Attack	620	160	22
Transport	450	40	21

Source: US Department of Defense, 2010.

The Pentagon has noted a substantial increase in the capacities of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) along the eastern coast over the past few years, a direct consequence of China's military modernization. In 2010, the annual report submitted to Congress pointed to an increasingly unfavorable military balance for Taiwan (US Department of Defense 2010). As Table 1 shows, based on data disclosed by the US Department of Defense, China has a numerical superiority in all areas: number of soldiers prepositioned in the Strait area, tanks, landing ships, and combat aircraft.

As for naval forces, a graphic representation is even more eloquent in illustrating this Chinese numerical superiority, emphasized by the Pentagon.

TABLE 2: COMPARISON BETWEEN CHINA AND TAIWAN'S NAVAL FORCES



Source: US Department of Defense, 2010.

This imbalance is driving American and Taiwanese strategists to recommend that Taipei reorient its equipment purchases towards “asymmetrical capacities,” which are less costly and are capable of checking China’s demonstration of force.¹⁶ Nevertheless, we should not allow ourselves to be too quickly convinced by this American observation. The presentation of this unfavorable military balance for Taiwan is based solely on a quantitative analysis. The 2010 Pentagon report, like preceding ones, does not combine this quantitative analysis with an analysis both of the operational condition of the opposing troops and the technical capabilities of their equipment. This absence of qualitative considerations substantially weakens the argument and tends to suggest a more or less deliberate desire on the part of Washington authorities to overestimate China’s rise in military power.

In addition, there is an astonishing neglect by experts to analyze China’s capability to coordinate the use of its troops in such a conflict scenario. In fact, an invasion of Taiwan would involve the combined operation of air, naval, and to a lesser extent, land forces. Now, not only has China not undertaken a campaign on such a scale over the last few decades, but the experience of post–Cold War wars (particularly, the 1991 Gulf, 1999 Kosovo, and 2003 Iraq wars) highlights the extreme complexity of such operations, even for a country as advanced as the United States. In other words, the American map of Chinese military power misses a fundamental element of evaluation: the process of using force.¹⁷

Nevertheless, these analytical inadequacies do not prevent any of the think tanks close to the Pentagon from promoting utterly pessimistic scenarios on a conflict in the Taiwan Strait.

The Rebirth of Scenarios for Conflict in the Taiwan Strait

To understand the representations of American analysts formed on the basis of the preceding maps and graphics, nothing is more illuminating than to examine the military scenarios drawn up for the past several years. The very profusion of these works tends to make them a literary genre in their own right. James Kraska, professor at the US Naval War College, imagines a naval battle around 2015 in the course of which the aircraft carrier *USS George Washington* is torpedoed by a Chinese submarine near the American naval base at Yokosuka, Japan (Kraska 2010). In the

16. Interviews, Washington, DC, December 2010.

17. Interview with Roger Cliff (RAND Corporation), December 2010. On the importance of the use of force in the evaluation of a military power, see Stephen Biddle, *Military Power: Explaining Victory and Defeat in Modern Battle* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).

Small Wars Journal, Charles Dunlap, Air Force general, describes in a similar way how the American armed forces will lose the “war of 2020” (Dunlap 2010).

In his work, *7 Deadly Scenarios*, Andrew Krepinevich goes even further. In an extremely detailed fiction, the author imagines a China tempted to hasten its domination over East Asia. Beijing thus intends to win “without combat” by convincing Seoul, Taipei, and Tokyo that it is preferable to accommodate its intentions. In Krepinevich’s scenario, China would aim at implementing a “Finlandization” of the region, at the direct expense of the United States. In pursuit of this aim, China’s People’s Liberation Army would draw up a so-called anti-access strategy in the area, based on air defense forces, offensive information war capabilities, ballistic missiles, anti-ship cruise missiles, and anti-satellite weapons. This would lead to an air and naval blockade of Taiwan, supported by mines and submarines with orders to sink any ship, commercial or military, venturing near Taiwan. At the same time, cyber-attacks targeting the communication and information systems of the island’s allies (the United States and Japan) would be undertaken. Krepinevich closes his narrative on the threshold of a total conflict between the United States and China, emphasizing that at this stage there would remain only two choices for Washington: “war or capitulation” (Krepinevich 2009, 209).

Despite American military domination in the region, these works emphasize Chinese capacities to circumvent the power of the United States. In this respect, they are similar to a group of works undertaken since the middle of the 1990s by the Office of Net Assessment (ONA), a Pentagon organization for studying trends and future prospects for the US military. For two decades, this unit has been financing research concerning the concept of Assassin’s Mace. This term refers to a new philosophy of Chinese strategy, *Shashoujian*, which consists of “combining Western technology with Oriental wisdom” (Bruzdinski 2004, 317). Assassin’s Mace, then, is supposedly a Chinese initiative to operate by surprise, by scrambling American information and communication systems and launching attacks to deny the US Navy access to the Chinese coast. The operational application of Assassin’s Mace is found in the idea of “anti-access capacities.”

These capacities designate “actions that would impede the deployment of U.S. forces into the combat theater, limit the locations from which those forces could effectively operate, or force them to operate from locations farther from the locus of conflict . . .” (Cliff et al. 2007, iii). These actions would not challenge the leadership of the United States in maritime spaces, but would strongly increase the political and military cost of an American naval intervention in case of a revival of tensions in the Pacific.

Despite the current success of these scenarios, it would be prudent to maintain some critical distance. In his text “Towards Contextualizing the Concept of a *Shashoujian*”

Alastair Iain Johnston of Harvard emphasizes that the expression translated by Assassin's Mace, *Shashoujian*, is frequent in Chinese popular culture and is not reserved for military issues. Moreover, the supposed foundation of Assassin's Mace, the circumvention of the enemy's capacities, is only, in the end, an obvious strategic aim that all modern armed forces attempt to pursue, more or less successfully.¹⁸

Despite its specious character, this idea of Assassin's Mace facilitates the effort to gather together all of the Pentagon's diverse speculations on China's rise in power and shape them into a coherent narrative. There are strong reasons to wager that the concept will continue to structure American thinking on the Chinese armed forces. Consequently, American scenarios concerning Chinese anti-access strategies should not be evaluated on their probability (relatively low), but on their relation to what they teach us about the terms of the American debate on the Chinese threat. The most serious consequence of this phenomenon could well be the emergence of a "Chinese dogma" among American military decision makers.

The Implications of the American Military "Dogma" on China

The American perception of a Chinese threat in the Pacific does not have only intellectual consequences for the debate of ideas in Washington. Even more, it leads to conflicts within the Pentagon over budget priorities for the armed forces. But above all, in the long term, this crystallization runs the risk of offering to the decision maker only a deformed mirror of the strategic stakes in the Taiwan Strait.

The Politico-Military Implications: A History of AirSea Battle

The *Quadrennial Defense Review* (QDR),¹⁹ published by the US Department of Defense in March 2010, announced the introduction of a new concept of using naval and air forces, AirSea Battle. The Secretary of Defense, Robert Gates, asked the heads of the Navy and Air Force to work together to draft the document. The initial objective was to respond to anti-access strategies with which the American armed forces could be confronted. In other words, without officially mentioning China, this concept expresses the assessment of the potential threat of China in the Pacific Ocean in case of a conflict over Taiwan.

18. Interview with Michael Swaine (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace), Washington, DC, December 2010.

19. Officially addressed to Congress, the QDR is a document that defines American military policy. It is issued by the Department of Defense every four years.

On initial examination, AirSea Battle illustrates a substantial return of two branches of the armed forces (the Air Force and Navy) to concerns that existed prior to the counter-insurrection phase of the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. This concept responds above all to a twofold political objective: internally, to contain the simmering discontent in the Navy and Air Force; and externally, to highlight, for China and US allies in the Pacific, American capacities in conventional deterrence.

In anticipation of a future stabilization of Pentagon financing, the Secretary of Defense, Robert Gates, has to temper the anxieties of the Air Force and the Navy, which consider themselves ignored by the emphasis placed on asymmetrical threats and the preponderance of counter-insurrectional capacities assigned to Iraq and Afghanistan. Consequently, AirSea Battle serves as a basis for advocacy by supporters of maintaining air and naval projection capabilities. In other words, it is a question of preserving the apparent status of the Air Force and Navy in current institutional conflicts.

But AirSea Battle also responds to an external strategy directed not only at China, but also at regional allies (Japan, Australia). The concept is, first of all, an explicit reference to an older concept, AirLand Battle, drawn up following the Vietnam War to contain the USSR in the context of a potential air-land campaign in Europe. In this sense, the historical analogy symbolizes the Pentagon's intention to signal to China its firm intention to maintain its military forces in the Pacific and emphasize the strength and permanence of its conventional deterrence capabilities.

Finally, while explicitly displaying the determination of the American armed forces to contain emerging Chinese air and naval power, AirSea Battle is also addressed to regional allies. Using the conflict scenarios that underlie AirSea Battle, the concept is a tool for the strategic dialog of the United States, particularly with Japan and Australia. It strengthens the American position aimed at consolidating its military cooperation with Japan (air and naval bases and the development of the anti-missile defense system) and Australia (maritime surveillance and long-distance support operations in the Indian Ocean and Oceania).

Thus, the AirSea Battle concept attests to the very concrete implications that the analytical assumptions and Pacific conflict scenarios presented above can assume. It remains the case that the assumptions behind the direction taken by the current military strategy of the United States in the region may prove to be distorted.

The Pitfalls of American Portrayals of the Chinese Threat

The risk of a distorted analysis of the military geography of the Chinese coast has been emphasized on several occasions by American researchers (O'Hanlon 2000, 53). In most of the works that venture to present future strategic possibilities, we can

note three pitfalls: first, an approximation or over-interpretation of Chinese intentions; second, the relative neglect of Taiwan's own behavior; and third, the psychological risk of a "missile gap" syndrome.

On Chinese intentions, many China specialists have challenged some of the conceptions put forward by the American military. Thus, for some, Beijing's strategic approach does not consist of planning for a war in the Taiwan Strait, but creating a military balance so favorable to China that combat would be useless (Bush and O'Hanlon 2007; Newmyer 2009). In this view, the Chinese army is not preparing to conduct a war, but instead acquire all the instruments of power necessary to avoid it.

Also concerning the question of Beijing's intentions, none of the scenarios succeed in determining the role that nuclear weapons would play in the narrative evolution. Quite surprisingly, the Taiwanese scenario often ends up being the classic case of the invasion of an island by an actor X and the immediate reaction of this island's ally Y. What happens if Y and X have nuclear weapons? When the promoters of the AirSea Battle concept maintain that the American military must be provided with weapons systems allowing for precise, long-distance strikes (Van Tol et al. 2010), an area in which the Americans have no competitor, they only encourage other actors to resort to nuclear weapons. That the United States, whose national security is not in question, can limit itself, so to speak, to planning a "classical" response is logical enough. On the other hand, that China, for which Taiwan has represented a vital interest for six decades, can simply submit to a conventional American response and then return to the initial state of the scenario seems inconceivable (Zhang 2008).

In fact, the nuclear unknown, too often overlooked by military planners, is the vanishing point of the Sino-American scenario: it alerts us to the impossibility of imagining a conflict between the two that could be reduced to a simple classical confrontation that could conclude in one of two ways, either by China's absorbing Taiwan or by Beijing's suffering a heavy military defeat.²⁰ This analytical oversight leads American analysts to put forward, with too much confidence, a scenario of conventional escalation that risks underestimating the nuclear dimension.

Then, note that these scenarios come close to formalizing a strictly Sino-American confrontation, leaving aside how that would interact with Taiwan's own actions as the third party to the conflict. The American map of the Chinese threat should not forget that the potential conflict in the Taiwan Strait depends on a balance of forces between the United States, China, and Taiwan. The specific role of the latter is often omitted. While any Taiwanese movement towards independence

20. Interview with Michael Swaine (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace), Washington, DC, December 2010.

represents, and has always represented, a *casus belli* for Beijing, Taipei's posture has proved to be extremely changeable, and sometimes even paradoxical, over the years.

Since the regime's democratization movement, initiated in the 1980s by Chiang Ching-kuo, then continued by Lee Teng-hui, Taiwan's defense policy has been dependent on three variables: the credibility of American assurances of security, the perception of the Chinese threat, and domestic politics (Chase 2008). It must be noted that the Taiwanese defense budget substantially declined over the course of the 1990s, even though the relationship with Washington eroded (despite the 1996 demonstration of force), and that China undertook a modernization of its forces such that the military balance between Chinese offensive forces and Taiwanese defensive forces, at one time in Taipei's favor, today has changed dramatically in favor of Beijing (Bush and O'Hanlon 2007, 107). In this context, the risk of an escalation could also come, not just from the United States or China, but also from Taiwan's desire to prevent a change in the local military balance. To avoid such a situation, Taipei places substantial pressure on the American defense establishment to ensure that it reaffirms its security commitments for the island.

Recall that the Taiwan Relations Act is not a defense agreement that would force American forces to intervene out of solidarity. Since President Nixon's recognition of the People's Republic of China in 1972, American policy with regard to the Sino-Taiwanese conflict has been formed around a double deterrence: deter China from attempting to retake the island by force and deter Taipei from provoking a conflict by announcing a *de facto* independence. In other words, Washington's strategy is to preserve a status quo that inexorably becomes less and less apparent.

As the Pentagon's last annual report on China emphasizes, the growing capacities of the Chinese People's Liberation Army continually undermines this American posture. The January 2010 arms sale and even the possible export of F16 planes in the near future are only political signals from Washington, which do not fundamentally change the military balance. Here again, the Americans are, perhaps, prisoners of a portrayal of the geostrategic issues in the area that focuses only on two sides. In analyzing only the case of a Chinese surprise attack, a scenario long dominant because of the asymmetrical capabilities of the two actors, Washington runs the risk of being taken by surprise in case of a preventive attack by Taiwan in the near future, when the change in the Sino-Taiwanese military balance will become such that Taipei will consider that there is no other option to prevent its *de facto* absorption. The probability of such a case, which would be similar to the Russo-Georgian war of 2008, is today extremely low and only a series of political misunderstandings and misinterpreted military movements between Beijing and Taipei could lead to conflict. Nevertheless, Taiwan is too often absent from the scenarios of American analysts.

Finally, a large number of American works studying the geography of the Chinese threat tend to overestimate the real capabilities of the Chinese People's Liberation Army. This creates a real psychological bias in understanding the problem. While this characteristic can be understood by the role of bogeyman that China plays in domestic American politics today,²¹ it is also the result of a problem of military intelligence regularly pointed out by historians (Renshon 2009, 116). This missile gap syndrome²² affects not only the work of analysts, but also the perceptions of military decision makers within the Pentagon and the Pacific Command. In the latter case, the portrayal of the Chinese threat becomes a factor in an arms race. For example, it leads promoters of AirSea Battle to defend the acquisition of long-range precision strike weapon systems that could reach deep into Chinese territory.

In light of this, we must acknowledge that the American debate on a conflict in the Taiwan Strait still has many good days ahead of it. Its revival over the past few months seems to announce the end of a strategic parenthesis marked by the American counter-insurrection campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan. A war between Washington and Beijing on the future of Taiwan is today not very likely, but internal tendencies within the Pentagon demonstrate that it remains more than ever a scenario that affects not only the geography of American military intelligence, but also the long-term planning process of the American armed forces.

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21. As evidenced by the use that Tea Party candidates made of it during the midterm elections in November 2010.

22. This refers to an American political debate at the end of the 1950s in which great concern was expressed about the USSR's substantial advance in intercontinental missiles. Historians have since demonstrated that the estimates of the American intelligence services were far too alarmist on how advanced the Soviet arsenal actually was.

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